

ASSISTANT SECRETARY JOHN M. THOMAS

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: Mr. Thomas did not edit this transcript]

Q: Mr. Thomas, how did you become interested in the State Department?

THOMAS: In 1950, I was looking for employment. I had a degree in Political Science from the University of Iowa and had come to Washington looking for employment. I was referred to the State Department. My introduction to State was through conversations I had with personnel officers concerned with the Civil Service employment who said that since I did not have "Civil Service status", there were no jobs available.

As I left the room after that brief encounter, I saw a lady sitting in a room with leather furniture. I knocked on the door and said "May I speak with you for a moment?". I went in and explained that I had just arrived in Washington, did not have "Civil Service status" and that I was looking for a job in the Department of State. She then proceeded to interview me, took me upstairs to the Office of Personnel people (in the old Walker-Johnson building). When I walked out about 4:30 that afternoon, I had an offer of employment pending the satisfactory completion of a medical test and security screening. I also had a commitment to send in papers for my then-fiancee whom they would also consider for a job. I returned to Iowa, got married. We both sent in our papers; we both got clearances and we both came to Washington and accepted employment in April 1951.

Q: It shows right from the beginning, it is best to by-pass the initial screening. One of the pieces of advice I give people is to never go to Personnel if you want a job, because their function is to screen and screening means turning away mostly.

THOMAS: Well, it can. My experience was fascinating. I ended up in the Office of Personnel, working for one of the teams on the Departmental side because in those days, we had the division between Departmental and Foreign Service personnel. Both were under the Office of Personnel, but distinct and separate.



Q: Could you describe some of early jobs. You rose through the ranks quite steadily and quickly.

THOMAS: I started as a General Schedule (GS)-3 clerk-typist on one of the personnel teams, assisting personnel officers and technicians in the processing of papers, both for applicants and in-service personnel. At that time, all of the personnel processes were vested in "teams" that were servicing various bureaus and offices of the Department. We did recruitment, we did all assignments, promotions, transfers, etc. I therefore became involved in all aspects of human-resource processing in the Department, particularly in the administrative area because the team that I served on handled primarily the administrative area of the Department. That is where I began.

Q: Looking back on it, how did you feel about the administrative personnel the Department was recruiting?

THOMAS: The first thing you have to understand is that I come from the point of view that there are two kinds of management in the Department of State. There is policy management and then there is resource management. As you know, most of my career was devoted to the latter. In the early 1950s and into the early 1960s, the quality of administrative personnel, in any facet of administration-communication, data processing, general services, personnel-was generally excellent. The Department was recruiting well-qualified people. I think this can be established quite easily by seeing who, as the 1950s and 1960s progressed, became the leaders on the resource management side. I count among this group such people as Paul Hallman, Mace Boyds, etc. who went right on into senior level administrative positions in the Department.

Q: Was the Department doing anything right in recruitment?

THOMAS: Yes, it was. It targeted its recruitment which is what we are suggesting in our Commission report should happen today. This is not to say that on the Foreign Service side, they were not giving the exam. They were. But the Department was still targeting recruitment in terms of specialized needs it had. I think there was at that time more appreciation and understanding in part for the totality of the requirements in the Department. That seems to have been lost somewhere in the last ten years.

Q: The old Foreign Service exam, when I took it, was three and half days. I feel that when the Department was recruiting in the 1950s, many of the people who became leaders were males. It was more or less a male-oriented society. Almost all applicants had had sometime in the military, which was probably a good training ground.



THOMAS: If you are suggesting that at that time one might have said that there was more discipline in the Service, more understanding of the need for discipline and a greater awareness to determine your goals both strategic and tactical, then I would certainly agree that was understood. It was implicitly understood by many of the people who were entering the Department and at that time we were preparing language and area specialists for many of the difficult languages. In late 1950s and early 1960s, as the African nations began to emerge, we began a very fine program of African language and area training. We were preparing people to assume responsible roles in the emerging countries. Also I think FSI had a very good area and language program at that time. There was a greater understanding of the need for language and area specialization than perhaps in later years. Q: I think all of us believed that if we were to have any future in the Foreign Service, we had to specialize in an area and language.

THOMAS: It is interesting how that has changed. The perception now is that the word "management" means that an officer today must have some experience in the broad field of management, whatever that means. Therefore, positions such Embassy Counselor for Political Affairs or Economic Affairs in large embassies are in fact, in some cases, being unfilled because an officer would prefer to be a Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) in a small embassy because that presumably qualifies him or her for "management".

Q: We are talking about the system today, in 1989, which is undergoing considerable scrutiny, which will discuss later. Did you have the feeling when you were in recruitment that there was a problem in attracting qualified applicants?

THOMAS: No. I don't recall any such problem. We did have difficulties in attracting enough secretarial applicants, which is still a problem. But that was a matter primarily of coming to Washington from other States, living in the big city on a rather small salary. The FBI could recruit clerical people because they obviously took better care of their people, made a greater effort to bring them into a "family-type" situation. They were one of our biggest competitors in terms of recruitment teams going throughout the United States.

Q: Was there any attempt made at that point to try to create more a "family" atmosphere? After all, State is not a very large organization.

THOMAS: No, it isn't. I think on the Foreign Service side there was certainly more of a "family-type" feeling that there was on the Civil Service side. The Civil Service population at that point prior to Wristonization comprises a bigger percentage of your working force than it does today. I was there at the time, in 1951 and 1952, when the Department underwent a rather massive reduction-in-force because of budget cuts. Then we ran into the Wriston Committee report. All of a sudden we were into a debate on which positions were dual-service, which were Foreign Service and which were essentially Civil Service.



The Wriston Committee report was an early effort to review the Department of State-how it should be organized and what its personnel system should look like. We were back to the question of domestic-based plus foreign service-a question that has still not been answered in the context of people serving both abroad and domestically. Should they both be in the same service? How much time should they spend in one place or the other? Wriston also dealt with training and qualifications of individuals. It was a very comprehensive review. As a result, positions in the Department were designated as Civil Service or dual-service-could be occupied either by a Foreign Service or Civil Service employee-or Foreign service. At that point, if you were an incumbent of a designated dual-service position and you had satisfactory "officer evaluation rating" (OER) performance ratings, as a civil servant, you were qualified for lateral entry into the Foreign Service. If you were in a non-dual position, you could apply, but you had to take an oral examination before a panel constituted by the Board of Examiners (BEX). Many people "lateraled" in at that point as Foreign Service. That was an early precursor of what we later went through again when the Foreign Service Reserve (FSR or FSR-U (unlimited) Corps was expanded. We had all types of interesting nomenclatures to describe the same phenomenon.

Q: How did the Wriston report impact on the Civil Service ranks? What was your experience and that of the people around you?

THOMAS: All of us at the Civil Service General Schedule 7 or 9 level-I don't remember which-had to have our positions designated by our offices as either dual-service or non-dual service. That information was then provided to the Office of Personnel and the incumbents of those positions were offered an opportunity to join the Foreign Service.

How did the process impact on them? The people who entered the Department under Civil Service-an appointment identical to that of any other Federal Cabinet agency- all of a sudden found themselves with rules and personnel approach changed. They were told that they had to face the question of whether they wanted to join the Foreign Service or did they want to continue under Civil Service. Obviously, there was a backlash with people feeling that if they didn't accept the opportunity for dual service designation, their careers as Civil Service employees would be somewhat stultified because as the Department enlarged the pool of Foreign Service employees that would impact on the incumbency of jobs in Washington.

Q: Was there an exodus from the Department?

THOMAS: Not that I recall.



Q: Looking at the situation as a manager, how did you feel this program which brought with it a lot more personnel movements, shorter tours of duty-including in Bureaus such as Intelligence and Research (INR) and Personnel, where there were people who were depositories of a great deal of information and institutional memory-, a new "broom" every coming in every few years? Did you notice a diminution of efficiency?

THOMAS: It certainly changed the character of the Foreign Service and of the domestic service. In the old days, for example, on the Foreign Service side in the old Division of Foreign Service Personnel, they had teams which serviced the various regional bureaus. Those teams were composed of a permanent cadre of Civil Service employees, both officers and technicians, and Foreign Service officers. I remember Ed Mulcahy and a number of others who served in that Division. They represented the bureaus' interests in conjunction of the more permanent cadre from the Civil Service. Quite frankly, that was an excellent arrangement and, to jump ahead a little, our current Commission's report now recommends that the assignment process be put back directly with the bureaus rather than having the central personnel office (PER) serve as their surrogates in terms of selection of people for service overseas. I believe that is where the responsibility should be. I believe the bureaus have to be involved to represent their needs. They know best what is required at each post in their regions. It is not only a matter of qualifications, but also a question of the chemistry of people. That is very important at a post. I feel that in many aspects, the old ways of doing business were not that bad.

Q: You were there during the McCarthy period? Could you describe how you saw that time and the views of people around you?

THOMAS: I was there when all the records were brought back from St. Louis. The Department had been accused of having sent the pertinent material about individual employees to the central depositories in St. Louis in order to get alleged derogatory information out of the current files. As a result, we had returned literally a room full- forty or fifty file cabinets-full of material. We then had to form a team-Hampton Davis was one of the individuals-who screened every piece of paper that came back to see if any of the material which had been stripped from their files, was pertinent to people then employed.

What was the impact on the Department? Absolute panic for a while. It was chaos.

Q: Was there any truth in charge? Did the Department try to "cleanse" the files?

THOMAS: I recall few, if any, incidents that would validate the allegation. There may have been a few pieces of paper that some remote stretch could be said to be pertinent to an individual, but I don't remember personally any thing of a derogatory nature or of substance having been found.



Q: Did you have the feeling that there were "Evil Gods" looking over your shoulder ready to strike with lightning.

THOMAS: No, it was just Washington-that's all. Just the Washington bureaucracy. It was called "State Department bashing". It started with the story of the "China hands" and the problems we had with China. McCarthy picked up all of that and all of a sudden allegations were made. In some cases, I would guess, there may have been some substance, although I can't speak with any authority about what, if any, substance there was. From my clerical perspective, I remember people being very careful, very gingerly in terms of their actions at that point. It was a time of very difficult circumstances. I went back to Iowa and told the local people that I worked in the Department of State. They thought I referred to the government in Des Moines. I told them that I worked in Washington. One gentleman looked at me and very confidentially said: "Son, I have known you, boy and man. You are all right, but you watch those homosexuals and commies". That was the public's reaction, unfortunately. I remember that so clearly!

It was a tough period. But because of that and the Wriston report, which Loy Henderson tried to implement, and the changed nature of the Foreign Service as it began to move into this dual service concept, during the rest of my career, there were six or seven additional studies made about the Department and its personnel system. We have always ridden the horse back and forth on the question of "dual service", FSRs, FSR(U)s, FSOs. We have never really settled on any kind of firm human resource structure for the Department.

Q: One of the unsettled questions concerns the "generalists" vs. the "specialist". It concerns both the area or functional specialists, who would stay pretty much in Washington, and the overseas officials and those specialists who focus on one country or area. Is that compartmentalization better than having people who can perform successfully in a whole series of assignments which might make them better top-level managers?

THOMAS: I was told by one of the past Director Generals several years ago that what the Department did was recruit "generalists", create "specialists" and then tried to re-create "generalists" at the senior level. That is what we did.

Q: That seems to be an apt description.



THOMAS: It is not too far off-base. What we should be doing is recruiting people with broad backgrounds and education, with intelligence. They may be specialists in any one of the functional categories that we have in the Department and then you provide opportunities through career development to broaden their perspectives in all of the facets, either in their specialization or across the board-political, economic, consular and administration and its various facets-. They are broaden as they progress in their careers. That can and should include, for many, language and area specialization. They move up through a series of assignments designed specifically to give them a more general and broader base to assume senior positions in the Department, where they can be both managers of policy and of resources.

Q: Did you notice any change in the Department's approach, particularly on the administrative side, when the Kennedy administration took over in 1961?

THOMAS: At that point, I was the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and we did enjoy a resurgence under Harold Hoskins during the Eisenhower administration. We had received more attention, more space. There was indeed a renewed emphasis to try to get more appropriate training for more people. We were building at that point the language school. I didn't see any diminution in the resources that were being allocated to FSI or in the general thrust by management.

Q: I recall the feeling that one had to be trained. You had to find your language and your area specialty. It was very important to your career. It wasn't necessarily the jobs you held, but you had to build up your expertise, part of which was through language and area training. Where did this emphasis come from?

THOMAS: At that point, there were examples of successful officers in various posts abroad who were language and area students. This either came from their military experience or because of the military influence. I am thinking of people like Hank Byroade. They believed strongly in training. They felt that we needed people who understood the language, the area and the culture so that we could deal effectively with foreign countries. At that point there were perhaps more examples. I recall vividly that at FSI we were training a number of Arabists and Chinese specialists, even though at that time, our requirements for these experts were limited to Taiwan, Hong Kong and London. We caught hell because we taught Chinese to an officer who was going to be assigned to London. Congressman Rooney wanted to know why. I remember that case well. The answer was that it was in London that we had our contacts with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Q: I think we were actually holding talks in Poland, but I guess the officer was stationed in London and went back and forth. You mentioned the name of John Rooney. Would you talk a little about the impact- that we all felt- that Congressman Rooney had?



THOMAS: The allegation was that when John Rooney's name-he was the chairman of the House Appropriation subcommittee that handled the Department's appropriations- was mentioned in the Department, fear, trepidation and panic ensued. As far as many people were concerned, that was true; that is the way they felt. I am not of that school. If you look back and study the appropriations-not the hearings, but the amount finally appropriated in each fiscal year-you will find that except for the "Representation Account", which was referred to as the "Whiskey Fund", which Rooney steadfastly kept at less than a million dollars, John Rooney did not damage the Department of State. As a matter of fact, he was helpful to the Department. I happen to be on the opposite side of the general view of John Rooney. Rooney was tough in the sense that he asked questions which one should have been able to answer if you were a manager of any organization. The problem was that in many cases he knew the answer before he asked because he had sources in the Department and he watched what was going on. John Rooney definitely had an impact on the Department. No question. But I do not happen to believe that it was as negative as many people do.

Q: We come to the point where you went overseas as administrative officer to Manila in 1965 as an FSR-2. Prior to going out, what was your impression of the administrative specialty in the Department?

THOMAS: I thought at that time that the Department had some excellent administrative talent, given the responsibility that was placed on administrative area of the Department. That has changed dramatically over the years. The recognition that administrative people are providing services to many agencies abroad was slow in coming. In Manila, for example, we had representatives of over thirty other U.S. government agencies whom we supported. As far as the quality and caliber of people in the Office of Communications, for example, we were getting many stalwarts from among retired military. They came to the Department with a certain level of training which was beneficial to the Department. As far as general administrative people, we had some very good people both young and retired military who had joined the Foreign Service. We had a number of people, like myself, who brought into the Foreign Service through a number of programs-intern programs, for example, specifically designed to improve the administrative management in the Department. I thought we had very good people, but administration as we knew it then has changed considerably. Information management, with the advent of the computer and telecommunications, improvement in technology, for example has revolutionized our method of doing business overseas.



The rapidity with which messages can be moved influenced the Department considerably. The security issue as it has developed in the last ten years considerably influenced the Department. Here I refer to the terrorism problem and the safety of our people overseas which culminated in the Inman Commission report. That report resulted in a Bureau of Diplomatic Security which we did not have in the mid-60s. All of that has impacted on administration. In addition, there was the fact that we were providing and budgeting for the office space that was being utilized by the other agencies. The only thing we were charging for were services.

The other point that should be made about the 1960s, particularly the early 60s is the advent of Bill Crockett. He was a very important figure in the development of management and administration in the Department of State. Bill undertook various programs, one of which was named the "Administrative Enrichment Program". In order to maintain a level of qualified administrative personnel, Bill was doing some very targeted recruiting with certain people in Personnel. We were getting what was really the forerunner of MBAs-people who had taken business administration courses, financial management (CPAs). Bill was specifically recruiting young people for the Department and I confess that I was the beneficiary of many of those recruits. Bill was perhaps ten years ahead of his time in many of his concepts, both in the use of human resources and management. Bill introduced "sensitivity training". People would sit around a table and criticize each other. They argued back and forth. Bill introduced that into the Department. Bill had many new concepts for communications based on new technology developments. He was instrumental in moving the Department into the 20th Century, trying to modernize many of then older applications that had been done manually for so many years. This applied everywhere from budget preparation, files and records services to automation. Bill was indeed one of the early supporters of automation.

Q: That of course was in its real infancy at that time.

THOMAS: Right. That is why I say that Bill was ten years ahead of his time.

Q: I remember when I was in Personnel, we were working with the Royal Macbee system which was really old automation using a knitting needle with cards. It worked very well.

THOMAS: It was used in 1952 when the Department went through its reduction-in-force. In order to make up the reduction-in-force list by length of service, we used the old keycards.

Q: Those cards had holes punched in them and the knitting needles were used to lift out all the cards with the same hole punched in them. It went back to the 1870s, I believe. Very effective for a small universe.



THOMAS: Bill was very instrumental in moving administration. There may be some who would argue that he moved it too far, but I don't think honestly that Bill ever lost his perspective about the raison-d'etre of the Department. He understood the mission of the Department. What he was trying to do was to provide better administrative support and resource management to support the primary mission.

Q: As you were talking, I was reminded by my experiences. I came in as a regular Foreign Service officer. Got into the Consular field, which I liked very much. I was Consular Personnel slightly later than the time we are talking about. The Consular field up to about 1968, the Consular field was very much the dumping ground. There was no attempt to recruit people for this activity. The whole idea was that the consular area was a good place to put worn-out couriers, disgruntled secretaries and marginal officers or people from Personnel had no other assignments. Did you have any feel for that neglect of the Consular function which after all is one of the major functions of the Department and one which gets the Department in real trouble if not managed well.

THOMAS: There is specific legislation about the Department of State's responsibility in the consular area. There are very specific requirements in law.

Q: It is usually done because of the Department's unwillingness to face some of the problems. I refer to past periods. It has usually been Congress which as had to be the stronger proponent of the Consular Service. Did you feel this?

THOMAS: Initially, when I was in FSI, even though we had consular training programs-taught in part by Mr. Auerbach, who was then the visa expert in the United States (as I recall we even bought the text book that he wrote for the FSI course)-, there was no recruitment program or a skill maintenance program that would in any way enhance the careers of people in the consular field. There was no great emphasis on that. It wasn't until Bill Crockett came in that the situation changed. Nor was there great emphasis on the administrative support apparatus before the mid-1960s.

Q: We are talking about consular training which was not done very well. It consisted mainly of memorizing a set of rules which was most boring to everybody.



THOMAS: There wasn't much imagination in how the subject matter was presented. At the same time, we were trying to more administrative training with Bill Beauchamp and other specialists on personnel, general services, budget and fiscal. All was badly needed. But it was Crockett, through the force of his personality, his beliefs and the relationship he had established with the Congress, who led the change in direction in administration and management of the Department.

Q: Did you feel much personal antagonism towards you because you worked with Crockett?

THOMAS: Some of the things that Bill did-although as I said, he was ten years ahead of his time in many things-, such things as systems analysis, which began to encroach into substance, were perhaps questionable at the time. Bill might himself agree with that in retrospect. The quantification of resource requirements-how many political officers do you need to staff a post-began to shake the foundation of how we had always had staffed the posts. Bill nevertheless at the bottom line, never lost sight of the fact that administration is in essence a support activity, albeit a necessary support activity. While experimenting with analytical systems, he was concurrently making improvements in terms of the support apparatus and the people involved in it.

Following Crockett was Idar Rimestad and that was a sort of plateau in which initiatives did not flow quite as rapidly as they did under Crockett.

Q: Before we discuss that period, I'd like to cover your time in Manila, which was your only overseas assignment. You went as the Deputy Administrative Officer from 1965 to 1967. What were your duties just before you went to Manila?

THOMAS: I was the Executive Officer of FSI. I was responsible for personnel, budget, general services, the registrar's office and the audio-visual program. Essentially the administrative side of FSI. The opportunity to go Manila arose and I took it. I found that one of the most enjoyable and rewarding experiences of my career. I thoroughly enjoyed it. We had an excellent staff, we had an excellent Ambassador, two fine Deputy Chiefs of Mission (DCM) who professionals in every sense of the word. We had a professional staff.

Q: The Ambassador while you were there was William McCormick Blair, a non-career man. How was he as an Ambassador?



THOMAS: Excellent. He knew why he was there, what had to be done, did it very well. He had two DCMs while I was there-Dick Service, who was a professional of the first order and Jim Wilson, who had been transferred from Bangkok, where he had been DCM to Graham Martin. Jim Wilson was an excellent DCM. Dick Usher was the chief of the Political Section, Chet Beaman was in the Economic Section, Jack Lennon was the Administrative Counselor, Lou Gleeck was the chief of the Consular Section (the Consul General).

Manila was one of our busiest and largest posts. We had excellent people who worked together very well. We had the 13th Air Force at Clark Air Force base and the navy in Subic. A lot of military presence. The Ambassador did an extraordinary job of keeping all of the Country Team together. Just an outstanding Ambassador in my judgement.

Q: How did the war in Vietnam impact on our Manila Embassy?

THOMAS: We were heavily impacted in terms of reporting requirements on the political side. On the administrative side, we carried a heavy work load because we had to obtain tax exemptions certificates from the Philippine Foreign Ministry and Treasury and Customs because much of the material which was going to Vietnam was trans-shipped through the Philippines.

We also had a very heavy consular work-load because of our relationships with the Filipinos. We had a large Veterans Administration presence because of payments to the Philippine veterans. It was a very large and active post.

Q: How did you deal at that time with the problem of corruption? In terms of our employees and getting things done.

THOMAS: We recognized that could be a problem-baksheesh was not an unknown term in the Philippines. However, it was not a problem for us. We had adequate staffing of local employees; the contractors we used were obtained through an open bidding process. We had only one incident during my tenure there of a local employee who was caught in a fraud action. We had other incidents that required disciplinary actions, but the local employees that we had in the Embassy were excellent. The possibility of fraud and malfeasance in the Consular Section was rampant, but remarkably, we had no major incident that I can recall. The American supervisory force in the Consular section, starting with Gleeck, was excellent. They were very dedicated people. It was just an excellent post. I should mention that Jack Lennon, who was the Administrative Counselor and my boss, was absolutely one of the finest individuals and one of the best professionals that I have worked with.



Q: Why were you brought back in 1967 after a relatively short tour?

THOMAS: I was ordered back by Mr. Idar Rimestad because at that point there were some personality changes in the Management (M) area. Bill Tone was retiring and Bob Peck, who had been one of his deputies, was being promoted. They wanted me to come in and take the Director of Operations position. As a matter of fact, I was at that point being considered for two other overseas Counselor of Embassy for Administration assignments, which I told Mr. Rimestad that I preferred-I would have liked to stay overseas given the age of my children. It would have been much more beneficial from our family's point of view. I was told that I would return to Washington. So I came back.

Q: Tell us a little about Idar Rimestad, his style of operation, his effectiveness?

THOMAS: He was the Deputy Under Secretary for Management-that was before the position of Under Secretary for Management had been established. Idar was care-taker, if I can use that term. There were no radical or grand initiatives such as in the Crockett days. Idar just kept the show running. That was it. His relations with the Hill were substantially good. He got along with the appropriations committees. This was before the emergence of the importance of the authorizing and budget committees which are now such a major factor. In the old days, the hearings for appropriations really took place only before the Appropriations Committees in the House and Senate. Then the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee came into being and we therefore went essentially from two hearings to four and then when the Budget Committees became involved, we went to a multiplicity of hearings which greatly complicates matters.

Q: What were your main responsibilities as chief of the Office of Operations?

THOMAS: I was responsible for an Office which included data processing, finance, general services, language services, printing and publications, supplies and transportation-the business side of the house. I was not responsible for the formulation or presentation of the budget. I just had the financial operations side-the processing of invoices and checks. The rest was the traditional kind of administrative officer function that is performed overseas or in Washington. That plus supporting Presidential and Vice-Presidential travels and occasionally Congressional Delegations (CODEL) travel.

Q: Did you have much contact with Congress?



THOMAS: I was blessed in the sense that came to me rather incrementally. I had an opportunity to observe and then start dealing with Congress, so that by the time I became Assistant Secretary, I had built a certain reservoir of experience and acquaintanceship with some individual Congressmen and staffers which obviously accrued to my benefit.

Q: There is one aspect of the Department which is very important and often overlooked. I refer to how things are done. I include in that the various personalities who have been in charge of the management and administration of the Department. The Secretary of State, with very few exceptions, does not have time to worry about management. Following Idar Rimestad, who was there to "hold things together", was another person who had a major impact on the management of the Department, William B. Macomber-1969-73. Could you talk a little about him?

THOMAS: Bill was to say the least-and I am sure is today-a very dynamic personality. Bill was a very intelligent man, he knew the Department well and had served in the Agency for International Development (AID). He joined the Department during the Dulles period, I guess. Bill's management style was interesting, depending on where you sat. He was forceful, opinionated on occasion, but a man of action in the sense that Bill had one speed which was essentially "full speed ahead". Occasionally he did not look at the pitfalls that might appear in the future, although the task forces that he organized which made a management study of the Department-there were eight or ten different groups that Dean Brown, Fred Irving, Danny Williamson and all of us were involved in-were very beneficial. Bill tried to implement the recommendations of the task forces and again we went into another variation of the Wriston program-FSR, FSR (U), etc-. We went back to the old question of whether the Department was to be staffed by one or two services-Foreign Service and Civil Service. That whole question was rehashed. Bill was very supportive of automation. In fact Bill was very supportive of administration. But he never lost sight of the primary purpose of the Department. He had been a special assistant to Secretary Dulles and had been Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations. He knew a bit about how you dealt with the Hill.

He brought more awareness of the importance of dealing with those who "dispose" into the administrative area after we had "proposed". Bill's influence on some people will probably never be lost. Fascinating man!

Q: In a way, you can say that the management of the State Department is there to be grabbed by a personality. A leader can really lead in that area of the Department, unlike other many parts.



THOMAS: There is no question that the personality of the individual and the staff that he creates can very definitely take hold of the resource side of the Department and lead it. Without question! But there is more of a hierarchical understanding on the administrative side of the positions and responsibilities than there might be on the political side where desk officers may be one of several grades. The hierarchy is not as important because the rank is in the person and not the job.

Q: It also depends on the country and current events. The desk officer from Grenada has his or her moment of glory and then is gone.

THOMAS: I think they had about two weeks in the sun and that was it. Same for the China hands today.

Q: There is a feeling that the Department works really under crisis management. If there isn't a crisis, the accusation is that the Department creates one. People in the Department in non-intense jobs often work long hours. Have you found that management style which creates emergencies?

THOMAS: I don't subscribe to the theory of "emergency creation". In the Department you have a group of dedicated individuals who for whatever reason either came with or developed a workaholic complex. It is partly because they have such an intense desire to master whatever they have been assigned, whether it is desk officer or Country Director or whatever. They want to be, and rightfully so, the expert in a particular subject. That is their responsibility. And that is how they are perceived. That means assimilating a great deal of material-hundreds of telegrams-they really become the sifters, the assimilators of all information. That can not be done, according to them, in any other way than to physically read, assimilate and prioritize that information so that they are intelligently prepared to make recommendations, prepare option papers or whatever may be required. Create crisis? No. They have a tendency to become a little bipolar in their views and perhaps some may even suffer from what on the administrative side used to refer to as "clientitis". They become almost the representative of the country which they are watching. I think that is about to change because there are so many other interests now that extend beyond the bipolar relationships. These issues have become almost region by region as opposed to country by country. I think they have this fervent desire to be prepared to respond to whatever situation they happen to confront. Are they interested in making certain from a career development point of view that their personal and professional viewpoints are pushed up the organizational ladder so that they are visible? Are they aware that certain positions are more visible than others, thereby affording a better opportunity for promotion and movement upward? Certainly. Absolutely; no question!



Q: Let's look at some of the other people who have held the position of Deputy Under Secretary or Under Secretary of Management. There was L. Dean Brown (1973-75). What are your thoughts on him?

THOMAS: He was excellent. I worked directly for him and reported to him. He was a quick study, understood administrative support because he had been a manager of a post - Jordan - which went through very difficult times. He understood the need to communicate with people to impart to them goals and objectives that he was trying to achieve. Don't forget also that Dean and I both took our jobs at about the same time, which was just when Henry Kissinger came in. So we were trying to establish an administrative management structure that was in tune with the desires of a new Secretary.

Q: How did Henry Kissinger impact on your operations?

THOMAS: Very simply, as far as I am concerned. Henry in essence said that we were responsible for administrative management of the Department of State, that it was our responsibility and he didn't want to be surprised, but kept informed, but it was ours to manage. He had other things to do.

Q: Which is the manager's delight and rightly so.

THOMAS: Absolutely.

Q: How about any other Secretaries who "meddled"? Did you have any problems with any Secretaries?

THOMAS: No. Never!. The Secretaries that I remember and with whom I had greatest relationships were Bill Rogers, whom I found to be an absolute gentleman and who also left to us the management of the administrative area of the Department-he wanted to be informed, which we did-, Henry, with whom I had no problem, Cy Vance, who was also a gentleman who left the running of the administrative side to us. I had no personal problems in terms of "meddling" from the Secretarial level.

Q: Were you involved in the opening of China?



THOMAS: I went with the advance team for Nixon's visit to China in 1972. I was the State Department representative for logistic support for the White House team. It was an excellent trip. Obviously, it was trip that will go down in history, particularly for the individuals that were involved.

Q: Were the Chinese surprised by what a Presidential trip involves?

THOMAS: It was remarkable. I had always heard and read that bureaucracy may have originated in China. I am here to attest to the accuracy of that statement. Their demeanor was fastidious; they understood what we wanted; they gave us one of three answers to any question we posed: a) Yes, it will be done; b) No, that cannot be done or c) We will look into it. They followed up remarkably well. In fact, they double-teamed us most of the time. There were just so many of us and they literally doubled-teamed us. The interesting part was that they obviously could not get to Zhou En-lai, who was making the ultimate decisions on what would be done. Incidentally, he did that a rather pedestrian level of detail-who sat where for the first dinner at the Great Hall of the People - we were led to believe that the seating assignments had been discussed with Zhou En-lai. They couldn't get to him until rather late in the evening-9:30 or later. So all of our meetings with our counterparts took place from 11:30 p.m. on, usually at midnight. The meetings would go from then until one or two in the morning. Then at eight o'clock the next morning, the next team would be there to discuss with us what we had discussed the night before and if they had agreed to it, then they wanted to implement it. They wanted to move on to get the job done.

Q: There is an old saying in the Foreign Service that "One presidential visit is the equivalent of two earth-quakes". This one must have been particularly shaking.

THOMAS: It was different from any other that most of us had been involved in because most other places we had gone, we had representation. We had an Embassy. There was an infrastructure upon which we could call for assistance. In China, there was none of that. We had to rely on them. Han Soo, who is the Ambassador here now, was the Chief of Protocol. We dealt with him extensively.

Q: Could you talk a little about Larry Eagleburger?

He really came from the political area, had been for many years an assistant to Henry Kissinger. His movement into Management was a departure from his career.



THOMAS: The time I worked for Larry was one of the most enjoyable experiences that I had in the Department. Larry appreciated people who were professional, regardless of their specialty or skills, who could address a problem and solve it. He was helpful; he was a quick study; he asked the right questions; and never lost sight of the roles of the various disciplines in the Department. As long as you could go to him with a recommendation that made sense and provided an enhancement of whatever service you were attempting to provide, you had his complete support. In the time that I worked for him, never once did I ever have a decision reversed. Did I have some of my decisions questioned? Yes, as only Eagleburger can question you. If you have been questioned by Eagleburger, you know what I am saying. Very penetrating, very introspective, very forthright, straight questions. I always had an opportunity to talk to him and talk a problem through. As far as I am concerned, he was excellent in that position and I thoroughly enjoyed the period when I worked with him. It is that simple.

Q: Then there was Richard Moose for a short period of time.

THOMAS: Dick was there for a very short time. Dick was the nephew of Jimmy Moose, who was an American Ambassador for many years, primarily a Near East expert. Dick had started in the Department. He was one of four young officers that I took out of an early A-100 (basic officer) course and assigned them as program assistants to various FSI programs. Dick was assigned to serve as program assistant to Bob Rosso, who was in charge of the mid-career program. I had known Dick rather well. I recommended him as administrative assistant for the language school which we opened in Mexico City and he served there. I kept up with Dick during his time in the National Security Council and when he worked on the Hill. When he came back as a member of the transition team of the Carter administration, I was not surprised to see Dick. His primary interest was not in the administrative area. He was more interested in substantive matters, particularly political. I think he finally decided within a relatively short period of time, that management was not where his interests really laid. He relinquished the position and left.

Q: Then the last one of this group was Ben Reed, who was there from 1977 to 1981.

THOMAS: I worked about two years with Ben. He was a very careful, thoughtful manager who was instrumental in formulating the Foreign Service Act of 1980. My question to Ben was constantly: "I am not sure I understand what is broken; if we could just determine what is broken, then we might fix it, rather than redoing the entire Foreign Service Act". Nevertheless, Ben was sort of the father to that Act.

Q: Were there great pressures to come up with a new Act or was it more a tendency to redo something in order to put a personal stamp on an organization?



THOMAS: I did not discern the pressures to redo the entire Act. I did not! There were certain changes that probably should have been made and I think an opportunity was taken to just make an impact on the Foreign Service by rewriting the Act which is pivotal to the entire mission of the Department of State. It deals with the one major resource that the Department has: people.

Q: Did you or others foresee any of the problems at that time which subsequently have cropped up?

THOMAS: Some of the same problems may have existed at that time. The questions that you raised earlier-generalists vs. specialists-FSR, FSR(U)-FSO, GS- What are their roles?; how should they be dealt with? what is the Foreign Service?; what should it be in the future?; how can it better prepare itself to fulfill its mission. Those were the goals and as we talked to Cy Vance, as part of our recent Commission study, he actually went in to the rewrite of the Foreign Service Act. He believed that in 1980, the US Government would end up with a Foreign Service which would encompass State, AID, USIA, Commerce and Agriculture. It would be a totally integrated Foreign Service. That is not what happen. Each Agency has administered the Foreign Service Act of 1980 in a slightly different way. I did not foresee at that time-I was handling the budget and the financial management of the Department-any problems that may be apparent now, although usually any problems of a personnel nature usually show up in the budget formulation and execution. In 1980, I did not see problems of sufficient scope that would result in a complete rewrite of the Foreign Service Act.

Q: Who were some of the other players in the rewriting of the Act? The Director General?

THOMAS: To a degree.

Q: Did the pressure for reform come from mid-career political officers who always see those above them as dead-wood and they want to get them out.

THOMAS: We were afflicted at that point with the same problems that still exist. The term "hall-walkers" may not be used so much anymore, but we had to address that problem.

Q: "Hall-walkers" being people who because the Foreign Service is a rotational service find themselves without assignment.



THOMAS: Without a funded position. Limited Career Extension (LCE) which were offered as a result of the Foreign Service Act of 1980 were presumed to take care of some of that problem. I did not discern the pressure from the mid-career officers. As a matter of fact, it was interesting that in the days when the Act was being written it was somewhat difficult to get senior officers or higher mid-level officers interested in this project. There were those of us who maintained that this would have far-reaching and long-term impact on the Service. Some saw us as just crying "wolf". Later after the Act had been implemented it was interesting to note that there was a senior officer group emerge as an entity in addition to the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), which is both a professional association and a union. This group felt it had represent the view of the senior officers. I did not foresee the major impetus. I think every administration or every individual who takes over an office must make some changes and an impact. The Act was that administration's statement. It has had rather far-reaching effects.

Q: Looking at it from your vantage point, how did the Inspection Corps work? Once upon a time, Inspectors used to be important and then over a period of time their fangs seemed to be drawn. They came around and were usually a bunch of nice gentlemen that had to be entertained.

THOMAS: Let's approach it first from the perspective of an outsider, namely the Congress and particularly the Government Operations Committees and their over-sight responsibilities. These Committees said that the Inspection Corps in the Department was for all practical purposes not as effective as it should be in terms of the mission that it had been given. The basic reason was that today you might be in the Inspection Corps and you might criticize an officer for his performance. Tomorrow you might be working for that officer. Consequently, it might be difficult for an Inspector to be as critical and forthright as he might otherwise be. That is why today the Department has an independent Inspector General. This position was literally forced down the Department's throat. The Department had to accept an independent Inspector General.

Q: Do you think this was valid criticism or was it a bit of State Department bashing?

THOMAS: I think there was some substance to it. It was also a bit of "getting even" with the Department since the Department was not as forthright in its initial responses to the proposed legislation as it might have been. It engaged in some of its usual tactics with the Congress in terms of not dealing with them absolutely forthrightly and telling them the truth. We instead played with it a little bit to see whether it would not go away, which is a normal State tactic. There has always been in the department that if you push a problem back a little bit, you might not have to deal with it. Unfortunately, in the business I was in, those problems never went away.



Q: In dealing with other countries sometimes you can because they will go away.

THOMAS: That sense of timing and of priority is extremely important, but you better understand both the timing and the priority of the problem. Or else you have another problem!

The Inspection Corps served a purpose. I must admit that I became a bit disenchanted with it at times because when the Inspection team would first come to a post or to a Departmental office, it would ask the employees what their major problems were. In fact, the Inspectors had a form which they had to complete. The employee would give them an honest answer listing the problem or problems that he or she saw. Three or four months later, however long the inspection took, the team would return to the employee and regurgitate exactly the same list that had been given at the beginning of the process. The employee would say "Fine. That is what I told you. What can I do about it?". I never really saw any solid advice from the Inspectors that would have assisted the employee to deal with the problem.

The other aspect which bothers me even more is that I found very little follow-up. Presumably, the Inspectors were to follow-up at certain points to see whether their recommendations had been implemented. That sort of evaporated over a period of time. To me it would have been important to make certain that if a problem was identified, some remedial action be taken and I would have followed-up to make sure that such action was taken. All of the processes that I have ever been involved in were inextricably linked.

Q: You are a manager. You were involved throughout your career in the management side of the Department. Is there is an systemic problem with the Department in view that people are changing all the time and there isn't much follow-up? The management doesn't seem to work very well.



THOMAS: I don't think there is any question that the constant mobility of the work-force impacts the management aspects of the Department. There is no question about that. For years it has been said that, on a two years tour of duty overseas, the first six months were devoted to acclimation to the post and to establishing your contacts, getting the family settled, getting into the routine of the job. Then you were effective for a year; the last six months you were concentrating on your next assignment. Now this may be an overstatement, but that means that in essence you had a twelve-fifteen months effective period out of twenty-four. Indeed, as people rotate, everybody brings to the job a slightly different perspective or viewpoint. Or their relationship with a contact may be different than that of the predecessor. Undoubtedly, rotation has an influence. One of the things in which the administrative side has been a little bit luckier is that our problems are more or less constant in nature. We are dealing with personnel, security, communications, general services, etc. whoever we are supporting. Essentially it is the same kind of approach. Whether their income is a little different in terms of the allowances you have to budget for is of marginal difficulty because the formula and the approach the problem is the same. For a political officer it is indeed different because of the dynamics and culture of the countries. It is a much more changing kind of situation. Policy management which is really the reporting of incidents, the analyses of those incidents, the formulation of a policy recommendation with options with the decision being made by the political forces, followed by the implementation-each one of these steps becomes very critical. From the reporting point of view, it is my observation that some of our colleagues do not like to report anything but the most positive statements.

Indeed if they had gotten an instruction that they didn't really care to deliver to the host country-they are outstanding in the presentation of the written word-you had to be an expert in State Department language to clearly understand what they were saying.

Q: It seems that there has always been a great respect for the "great drafter". That often means that they can avoid saying things. That sometimes is a detriment.

THOMAS: Absolutely!. I just recently told a former co-worker that I hadn't fully appreciated the difficulties under which he had operated on the policy side. I had found the reporting would be rather different depending on the personality of the drafter. If for example, in a meeting with host government officials, the officials said "No. We will not do that and you can go back to your government and tell them NO". That may not be the way it is reported. It may be written: "It might appear that we will not be successful in this particular approach". For the decision-maker, it is critical to know that the man said "NO".

Q: Did you ever run across one of the most controversial figures of recent Foreign Service history, Graham Martin?



THOMAS: I knew Graham very well. Graham Martin is a past master of State Department bureaucracy. He understood what the game was, regardless of the issue might be, whether it was relations with another country or whether it was relations within the Department. He understood relationships. He was a master at strategic planning and as a tactician made maximum use of those who could influence and implement his strategy. I can remember Graham walking the halls-this was long ago-. The word was out that Graham Martin was undoubtedly "out". That he probably be leaving the Service. Within a matter of days, he was appointed Ambassador to Italy. I had known him previously when he was Ambassador in Thailand. He was there when we were in Manila and I used to see him at Chiefs of Mission meetings, etc. I worked for a very close personal friend of his by the name of Seaborn Foster. So I got to know Graham very well. Past master at bureaucracy. Understood intrigue, understood planning, understood how to implement. He developed his communications sources. In today's terminology, he had his network in place, he used it and stroked like a master. At the same time, perhaps on an occasion in certain circumstances, I could not say that I agreed with all of his goals or his objectives. But certainly a past master. Understood the bureaucracy-what made it go and how to maneuver it.

Q: Did you have any particular thorns in the management side or in Congress?

THOMAS: No. I was very fortunate in that my first experience was with John Rooney and Senator Pastore from Rhode Island. Fellows such as Crockett, Rimestad and Frank Meyer had introduced me to Rooney and I kind of broke in as the junior officer. So I had met him; he knew who I was and he was very kind. His advice to me was that I had to understand that there was a difference between those in the State Department and those on the Hill. His introductory statements were questions to the principal witness at each hearing. For years they were the same. Inevitably, at the beginning of the hearing, there were two questions:"How many telegrams did you send this year? How many homosexuals did you catch in the Department this year?". As he explained to me, he had to satisfy his constituents because every two years, he ran for office. Otherwise, he would be unemployed. Once you understood that when the need to satisfy the constituents' interests was taken care of, then we got down to the business at hand. You realized that you couldn't take his questioning personally. That was not personal at all.



The first time I appeared before Pastore I sat with my briefing book across the table. Pastore opened the hearings by launching in to one of the most vitriolic diatribe against the Administration, OMB and the State Department I have ever heard. He just came out really steaming. It was my first time as a principal witness before a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee. I am sure that he looked at me and saw a look of abject fear and panic in my eyes. At that point, a very distinguished Senator with whom I had traveled several times and who was a member of the Committee, got up, walked behind Pastore, whispered something in his ear. Pastore stopped, turned to the stenographer and said : "Off the record". He reached over, put his hands on mine, which were folded across the briefing book and said: "Son, there is nothing personal in this. I just wanted to make my point about OMB and the Administration. We'll get to you in a little bit". He then went back "on the record", finished the diatribe, asked me all of four questions about the State Department budget and that was the end of it. So I learned that there is a personal and a professional side and that Congressmen run for office. Otherwise, with Rooney's successor, John Slack-excellent relationship-, Neil A. Smith-the present chairman-Senator Hollings-no problem. And I went through the days of the Panama Canal Treaty and Taiwan with Senator Hollings. Had several informative history lessons from him on both subjects which he had studied extensively. I dealt with him absolutely straight up, told him the truth whether it hurt or not. I thoroughly enjoyed my relationships with the Congress and with its staff.

Q: Do we do a good enough job in training our people how to deal with Congress?

THOMAS: No. We do not. Again, I go back to our Commission which is recommending more "Pearson" assignments-these are the assignments of State officers to the Congress. We are also recommending that the Department engage in more inter-agency assignments, so that people will get out-of-State experience.

Q: I wonder whether you can discuss the Commission that you have referred to on several occasions.

THOMAS: It is a "Commission on Foreign Service Personnel" that was authorized by the 1989 State Department Authorization Act. The Act authorized the Department of State, in conjunction with Congress to establish a Commission to examine the question of career stability in the Foreign Service personnel system. We have been engaged in it for one year; there are five Commissioners and our report should be published next week. The report will set forth our mandate, an executive summary, an assessment of the problem, both from the legislative and executive branches views, a summary the findings and recommendations.



Q: How good are these Commission reports that deal with the Department? There seemed to have a whole series of them. Some have profound effect, like the Wriston report. How are they treated?

THOMAS: I would hope of course that our Commission's report will have a profound effect. How they are generally treated depends on the management of the Department. In this particular case, we have interviewed in excess of 100 people, both in the Executive and the Legislative Branches. We talked to former Secretaries Vance and Shultz, to Secretary Baker, to Eagleburger, to Ron Spiers, to George Vest, to people in every "cone" as they used to call them, to Congressional staffers, to people outside the Department to get their perception of the problem, if indeed there is one. Having absorbed all of that and having been briefed on how it is being administered today, we came up with what we think is the appropriate approach.

How good will it be? Very simple. How good will Secretary Baker think it is? Will he approve and will he insist that it be implemented? It again is like every other report that has been done on the Department of State. We seem to have a pension for picking and choosing what we like and then we adjust by tinkering with the personnel system. You cannot tinker with a process or a portion of a process, be it recruitment, assignment, whatever it may be, without impacting all of the parts of that process. That is our problem. We have tinkered a little bit here and a little bit there and then can't understand why the totality doesn't work. The other thing that we have not done for at least the last ten years is to make a very concerted and conscious effort to determine what our requirements are. What is the mission of the Department of State and what are the resources requirements required to fulfill that mission? Until that is done, there will never be a stable personnel system.

Q: Looking back over your career-you retired in 1979 after six years as Assistant Secretary for Administration-what gives you the greatest satisfaction?

THOMAS: The greatest feeling that I have about the Department of State is that I left a career that I found challenging and satisfying with comraderie with people that I found to be outstanding. Many of them outstanding in any regard that you want. The single most important thing I can say is that I left with no regrets. That is to say, as I look back, there is not a single thing that I was involved in or that I undertook and accomplished, that gives me regret. I enjoyed every bit of it. I hope I made a contribution. It was a great career.

Q: The final question that we ask is : "If a young person comes to you to seek advice on whether he or she should pursue a career in today's Foreign Service, what advice would you give?". How would you answer that, particularly in light of the Commission you just worked on?



THOMAS: Very simple. If you are interested in participating in a process that is vital to the United States, which involves personal sacrifices in some cases, family sacrifices in terms of assignments, and if you are willing to work hard and understand that you must be a professional, then by all means. There is no more challenging career that I could suggest for any young person. It is not for every-one! But if you have any interest in what the United States does in the world today and in the future, I can't think of any place I'd rather be than in the Department and the Foreign Service.

Q: One last question. How do you see the major problem of recruiting minorities into the Department and the Foreign Service? Would you make exceptions in the examination process for minorities in order to raise their representation in the Department to a level more similar to their percentage of the total US population?

THOMAS: I don't think you need to make exceptions. As a matter of fact, you should not make exceptions for the simple reason that is not fair to the individual that you made the exception for. They will suffer in the long run. So will their colleagues. So will the institution. It is not the right way to do it. You go out and you target your recruitment. The minorities are as capable of competing in the Foreign Service as any one else. There just has not been the initiative to go out and bring them in. The other problem is that when a young person graduates from college or they have just finished their first career opportunity outside of college and have decided that they have an interest in the Foreign Service, it has taken anywhere from eighteen to twenty-four months to bring them on-board because of the recruitment and examination process. That is absolutely ludicrous. How do you expect a person to sit around and wait for 18 to 24 months to be appointed to the Foreign Service at probably less salary than their colleagues are getting in industry? That is ludicrous. The Commission has addressed that issue. We have said that recruitment should be targeted at schools and elsewhere; that the examination process should be a general exam which would test aptitudes and general approach; that there should be an interview; candidates should be offered an appointment in less than six months. There is no reason why that can not be done. None!

Q: On that note, let me thank you very much for your time. I look forward to reading your Commission's report.

End of interview